

**Facilitating Site Specific and Citizens Advisory Boards:  
Running Effective Meetings that Involve Complex Technical Issues - 9353**

Jenny Freeman  
Strata-G, LLC  
Knoxville, TN 37932 USA

**ABSTRACT**

Environmental cleanup issues at federal sites are more often than not on the agendas of meetings of the Site Specific Advisory Boards (SSABs), also called Citizens Advisory Boards (CABs), that exist at most U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) sites with an Environmental Management (EM) mission. In 1994, when Congress established these committees comprised of local citizens, it enabled community stakeholders to become more directly involved in DOE EM cleanup decisions. This involvement is to help the agency make cost-effective and environmentally sound decisions which lead to faster, safer cleanups.

Eight local Boards that fall under the Federal Advisory Committee Act-chartered EM SSAB charter are found in Hanford, Washington; Idaho; Northern New Mexico; Nevada; Oak Ridge, Tennessee; Paducah, Kentucky; Portsmouth, Ohio; and at the Savannah River Site in South Carolina. These boards provide advice and recommendations about EM site-specific issues such as cleanup standards (how clean is clean?), environmental restoration, waste management, the stabilization and disposal of non-stockpile nuclear materials, future land use and long-term stewardship, risk assessment and management, and cleanup science and technology activities.

These issues are, by their very nature, loaded with complicated technical terms and strategies, scientific data and interpretations, and long histories of studies and reports. The members of SSABs and CABs rotate on and off the Boards according to defined terms of office, thereby routinely opening the Boards' ranks to new members, many of whom are new to the issues. In addition, members of the public who have access to public comment periods at each Board meeting run up against the same daunting menu of obscure acronyms, scientific terms and notations, and an historical trail which is not always evident except to those involved with the issues over many years.

How does a facilitator effectively guide such a group of citizens, each of whom arrives to the Board with a different level of knowledge and interest? A facilitator need not be a scientist or an engineer, but he or she must be proactive in learning the site issues, responsive to concerns about meeting content that is too technical or not technical enough, and resilient when working with individuals for whom the goals of the Board are not necessarily their own.

When an SSAB or a CAB is working together purposively with ground rules understood and respect given to each Board member, a facilitator is free to develop effective processes to help Board participants and the members of the public focus on the content and substance of their work together. What are the processes that confront the challenge of ensuring that SSAB and CAB members understand complex technical cleanup issues? How can a facilitator be effective in working with members of the public so that their input is as valuable as possible while balanced with the goals of the Board?

This paper will explore the unique environments of this nation's SSABs and CABs; discuss the nature of issues that come before the Boards; examine the make-up of the Boards regarding their potential for

understanding complex technical issues and discuss facilitation techniques that provide structure while encouraging participation, interactive work on the tasks at hand, and satisfaction.

## INTRODUCTION

At a recent meeting of the Savannah River Site (SRS) Citizens Advisory Board (CAB), the CAB members in attendance sat through the following presentations:

- *The Status of Disposition of Depleted Uranium Oxide,*
- *A Quarterly Performance Measures Update,*
- *The FY 2009 Budget Status,* and
- *An Overview of the SRS Environmental Report for 2007.*

Similarly, at a recent meeting, Oak Ridge Site Specific Advisory Board (SSAB) members, including high school and community college student representatives, listened to a long, detailed presentation on the status of data related to studies of the groundwater underlying the Oak Ridge Reservation. How do these people relate to the information being presented, and how can a facilitator enhance the kind of understanding that is needed to help the CAB do its work?

## CAB Composition, Diversity, and Responsibility

Members of SSABs and CABs are drawn from nearly every occupational and industry group, and many of them reflect a diversity of geographical locations as well. Citizen advisory committees have played an important role in shaping programs and policies of the federal government from the earliest days of our country when President George Washington sought the advice of such a committee during the Whiskey Rebellion of 1794, and their contributions have been impressive (*Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) Brochure*, U.S. GSA, [www.GSA.gov](http://www.GSA.gov)).

Through enactment of the FACA of 1972 (Public Law 92-463), the U.S. Congress formally recognized the merits of seeking the advice and assistance of our nation's citizens, while at the same time ensuring that advisory boards "provide advice that is relevant, objective, and open to the public." The Congress also mandated that they "act promptly to complete their work." FACA established a means by which, with the expertise from advisory board members, federal officials and the nation would have access to information and advice on a broad range of issues impacting federal policies and programs. The public, in return, would be given the opportunity to participate actively in the federal government's decision-making process. This is no small undertaking.

The Department of Energy (DOE) has seven advisory boards in place throughout the DOE Complex that are under the purview of the Environmental Management Program (EM). The boards, comprised of 20-25 people, represent a broad spectrum of the public, including retired federal employees, members of special interest groups, students, and people impacted by DOE EM activities. The level of understanding of the complex issues that come before them varies widely, but one attribute unites the various board members, the desire to be a part of the CAB.

High-level technical presentations, whether they deal with environmental issues or budget information, are the hallmark of any meeting of the DOE CABs. At any given board meeting, from one to several PowerPoint presentations, packed with complex language, technical data, and scientific information, are delivered. Presenters give these presentations with the utmost professionalism and a desire for comprehension; but how does a board comprised of such a range of people representing a cross-section of the public comprehend enough to be able to make and approve sound recommendations to DOE?

## **Role of a Facilitator**

A facilitator who understands the tension between the need for the complex, technical information inherent in DOE EM nuclear cleanup and waste management issues and the level of CAB members' comprehension can help bridge the gap. If the premise that each member has something unique and helpful to offer the CAB is accepted and embraced, an effective facilitator can ease the insecurity of some board members and keep the CAB interesting and functioning for all members, not just for those with DOE experience.

Public participation is an exciting, untidy, fulfilling, difficult process, and absolutely necessary for government agencies to operate effectively. When people are accepted for membership by a given CAB, they bring to its proceedings their own backgrounds, intellects, and abilities. To lead such a group through its work is to guide it through fruitful and fulfilling discussions, disagreements, and dialogue. Because the work of an SSAB or a CAB is to offer advice and recommendations to DOE, each board member must develop a level of understanding and comprehension of the issues in order to participate fully. A CAB with members who sit, meeting after meeting, without asking a question or offering an opinion, loses the benefit of those members' experience and knowledge. Engaging the shy people who haven't found their voices while encouraging the members with experience and understanding is the challenge of a first-class facilitator.

Effective facilitation of such a diverse group that is challenged by complex technical consists of three basic skills:

- Know your audience,
- Follow meeting guidelines, and
- Become a role model.

Knowing your audience starts with an early childhood teaching: be kind to people and make them feel accepted and appreciated. Get to know each CAB member and learn that person's interests and attributes. Establishing personal contact with individual CAB members creates an atmosphere of acceptance and trust. That space of relaxation can then accommodate more readily the challenge of sitting through and understanding the details of a presentation on the history of mercury in groundwater or upcoming budget challenges.

When facilitating a meeting, work slowly, allowing the CAB to discuss and deliberate until it seems, as a body, to be at a point from which it can move forward. Be aware of body language, calling on people when the light of engagement is apparent. Sometimes when attempting to work a thorny issue while adhering to an agenda, a facilitator feels panic that time is against him or her. The tendency is to curtail discussion, action that will only frustrate the board. Rather, allow the discussion to continue, keeping one eye on the clock, until it appears that all who wish to participate have done so. Time can be captured later in the agenda by communicating small changes and asking people to share their allotted time.

Following meeting guidelines, such as restricting side-bar conversations and starting and ending a meeting on time is crucial in running an energetic CAB meeting that stays on track through the issues on its agenda. The majority of people who make presentations to CABs and SSABs have been briefed on the appropriate use of acronyms and ways to present information in as simple a form as possible that communicates the presenter's message. The facilitator can be a "shadow" assistant to a presenter by requesting that CAB members hold their questions until the presentation is over, thus allowing the presenter to move smoothly through the material. Often, questions during a presentation will be answered in just a couple more slides. Meeting guidelines frame the meeting and give the facilitator tools with which to create an atmosphere of learning and participation.

Becoming a role model to a CAB helps members accept their level of understanding of the issues and opens them up to learning more than they believed possible. A facilitator who enjoys the respect of the SSAB members is in the perfect position to encourage members to ask questions, make comments, and participate. A sensitive, patient, and tolerant approach goes far in encouraging people to delve into the issues at hand. It is important that a facilitator listen attentively and acknowledge each person's contribution. Differences in opinion and approach will occur among such a diverse board, but a good facilitator will allow differences of opinion to be expressed. A facilitator who has created an accepting atmosphere in which participants do not feel judged because of their lack of knowledge about the technical issues being discussed will elicit more participation than thought possible.

The International Association for Public Participation's Core Values state that public participation is based on the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process, and they include the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision. Building on those core values, the Co-Intelligence Institute has developed a set of guiding principles of public participation, including establishing ongoing participatory processes as a way for people to engage meaningfully. The principle of an ongoing participatory process is founded on the fact that "intelligence is the capacity to learn, and learning is an ongoing process. Therefore, collective intelligence can manifest most powerfully in democratic processes that are ongoing, iterative, and officially recognized by the whole community or society."

With the ongoing monthly or bi-monthly meetings of DOE CABs and SSABs, facilitated by a person with the skills to engage people at their level of understanding and encourage them by knowing them, following guidelines, and becoming a role model, the collective intelligence of the CAB can grow.